

# Star Lifestyle

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## TRAVEL

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# A haunting tour

A living museum in Penang offers a slice of World War II history.

By ALIA SITI KHADIJAH AZHAR and REMA NAMBIAR

THE Penang War Museum's prime seafront hillside location in Batu Maung affords a magnificent view of the Strait of Malacca.

Originally a military fortress built by the British in the 1930s, its scenic location, however, is just a fleeting distraction for visitors.

Just step onto the museum grounds – sprawled over a 7.83ha site – and they will find themselves transported to a section of this nation's dark past that witnessed

untold brutality, gruesome killings and torment.

The site owes its spooky feel to the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) during which the fortress was seized by Japanese troops who turned it into a detention centre for their war prisoners.

The Penang War Museum, which opened its doors to the public in 2002, is a living museum and most of the relics and structures that were part of the fortress have been restored to their original "glory". Visitors can explore its underground tunnels, bunkers

and barracks, among others, while the sight of the guillotine stand and gallows is bound to send shivers down their spine.

Little wonder the National Geographic Channel, which filmed a documentary series on the museum titled *I Wouldn't Go in There* in 2013, labelled it as one of Asia's most haunted sites. In 2010, the History Channel featured the museum in a documentary titled *Best Of Malaysia's Hidden Cities*.

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Photo: Bernama



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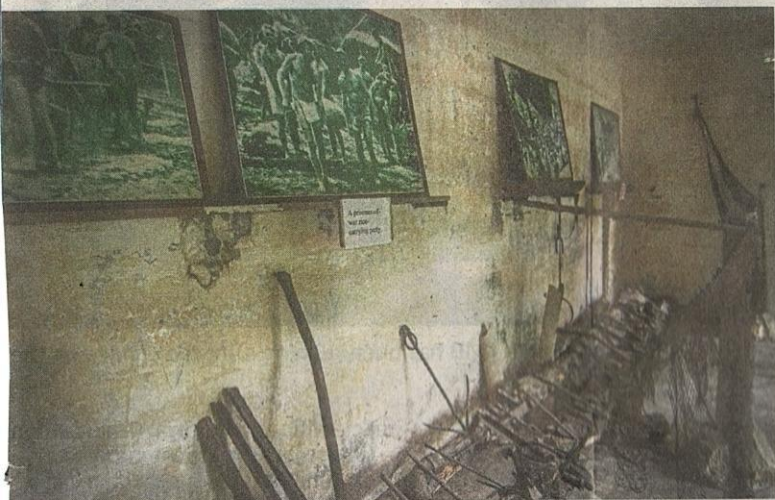
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The Penang War Museum is located on a hillside in Batu Maung.



Most of the relics and structures that were part of the fortress have been restored to their original 'glory'.

horror over the fortress. And, there is no shortage of ghostly experiences either. Some

"Even now this building evokes a sense of horror among visitors," he said.

By CHESTER CHIN  
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WITH modern-day comforts and the sight of skyscrapers in cities, it might be hard to fathom that Malaysia was once war-torn.

Some of us might have heard from our grandparents devastating stories of the Japanese Occupation during World War II. While those tumultuous times are now fodder for history textbooks, physical remnants of that past can still be found in some parts of the country.

For those interested in historical visits, consider visiting a war memorial or monument around the country.

The most obvious choice would be the National Monument or Tugu Negara in Kuala Lumpur. Dedicated to those who died in the country's struggle for freedom, the monument is home to the world's tallest bronze free-standing sculpture grouping.

The sculpture depicts seven figures. Five of them represent the allied forces in various poses: Holding the Malaysian flag, armed with a rifle and bayonet, armed with a machine gun and tending to wounded compatriot.

The other two figures on the ground represent the defeated communist forces.

With the surrounding lush foliage, the area where Tugu Negara stands is one of the few so-called "green lungs" in KL.

The popular Taman Tugu is located just beside the monument.

# Road to freedom

Make a trip to the war memorials for a reminder of the struggles in achieving the country's independence.



Tugu Negara is the world's tallest bronze freestanding sculpture grouping. — LOW LAY PHON/The Star

transportation workers who volunteered to help to build the

dedicated to those who did not survive imprisonment.

museum workers and visitors claimed that they have heard the sound of marching feet and caught a whiff of perfume and at times kerosene.

Some claim to have seen mysterious figures lurking around the fortress grounds.

Johari said while clearing works were going on at the site, he came across 5,000 rifles that were used by the Japanese army, as well as human bones and underground tunnels and lockups.

"It was at this fort where their prisoners were tortured and killed. It was also a transit point for prisoners from China, Indo-China, south Thailand and Malaya, who were classified according to their size, gender and expertise.

Some were later despatched to Kanchanaburi in Thailand to construct the death railway while others were inducted as forced labour or to participate in *kamikaze* missions (suicidal attacks)," he said.

According to Johari, a building inside the fortress that housed the generator was used as a torture chamber by the Japanese.

He said while the 30.5m-deep underground tunnel in the fortress was used by the British to store bullets and weapons, the Japanese soldiers used it as the "venue" to hang their prisoners to death and then behead their bodies.

"The heads of the unclaimed bodies would be displayed along the main roads to inject fear into the local people," he added.

Johari said he made arrangements to bury the human bones – belonging to prisoners and others killed by the Japanese – discovered at the fortress site in an undisclosed area before the museum was opened to the public. – *Bernama*

**The Penang War Museum is open daily from 9am to 6pm. Tickets are available at the door.**

The museum also offers a group package for those who wish to tour the museum at night (terms and conditions apply). For more information, check out the "Penang War Museum" Facebook page.

While the National Monument principally centres upon events during the Japanese Occupation and Malayan Emergency, the Ipoh War Memorial in Perak initially commemorates soldiers from Perak who perished during WWI.

The cenotaph – which was unveiled in 1927 – has now also become a monument dedicated to the soldiers of the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation.

Located in Ipoh Heritage Square, those who arrive in the city via the train would be able to see the structure once they step out from the Ipoh Railway Station.

The memorial also pays homage to the victims of the infamous Thailand-Burma Death Railway, although the inscription on the plaque only makes references to World War I and II.

Another grim reminder of how the war affected locals can be found at the Air Itam War Memorial Park in Penang.

The venue includes the World Peace Memorial and the Penang Chinese Relief Memorial. The latter depicts Penangite

road between Burma and China during WWII.

The small park is located off the Air Itam roundabout, which many locals and visitors would pass by when they make their way up to the famous Kek Lok Si temple.

There are also several war memorials in Sabah and Sarawak.

The clock tower behind the White Cat Statue in Kuching, Sarawak, is actually the state's first war memorial.

Located by the roundabout at Jalan Padungan, it commemorates Sarawakians who lost their lives during WWII.

As its name suggests, the Sarawak Volunteer Mechanics And Drivers Memorial is dedicated to Sarawakian mechanics and drivers who had served in WWII. It is located in Tabuan Laru.

Then there's the Batu Lintang PoW Campsite Memorial at the Batu Lintang Teacher's Education Institution.

The teachers academy was once a prisoner of war (PoW) campsite during the WWII. Visitors here will find a memorial plaque

Over in Sabah, two notable venues are the Kundasang War Memorial and Sandakan Memorial Park.

The former is dedicated to British and Australian soldiers who died in the Japanese PoW camp during the Sandakan Death Marches. Apart from a place of remembrance, the memorial is also home to beautiful gardens that feature local and international blooms.

The Sandakan Memorial Park also commemorates fallen soldiers during the Sandakan Death Marches. It's considered a pilgrimage site for Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldiers.

Every year, the Australian and New Zealand embassies in Malaysia will come celebrate Anzac Day, which is observed on April 25, on the memorial grounds.

More than an educational detour on history, a trip to the war memorials in the country will also remind us of the hardships faced in the journey towards the country's independence.

Many know the history of the bombing of Nagasaki by the United States. This museum is a memorial to that horrific incident, which took place on Aug 9, 1945 at exactly 11.02am.

The museum was completed in April 1996 and features the history of the bombing as a story, focusing on the events that lead to the attack, as well as a general look at World War II itself. There are displays of photographs, documents, letters and other notes that relate to the bombing, including the reconstruction of the city of Nagasaki.

There's also a feature on global nuclear weapons development.

The "twin" memorial is the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima, where the first atomic bombing took place on Aug 6, 1946.

### **JEATH War Museum in Kanchanaburi, Thailand**

This museum is a memorial to

the prisoners-of-war who helped build the Death Railway in Thailand for the Japanese, from 1942 to 1943. JEATH stands for Japanese, English, Australian, American, Thai and Holland, the main nationalities of the PoWs who worked on the railway.

The war museum was founded in 1977 by the chief abbot of a Buddhist temple, and is located within the Chai Chumphon Chana Songkhram temple. It is divided into two sections: One section shows the construction of the Death Railway and the PoWs' dreadful living conditions, while the other has displays of paintings, drawings and photos of and by former prisoners, all kept in a rustic bamboo hut. You can also find tools and weapons here.

### **Seodaemun Prison History Hall in Seoul, South Korea**

The Seodaemun Prison was built by the Japanese to keep Korean independence movement activists

and freedom fighters. It was first called Gyaemseong Prison when it opened in 1908, but when it became too crowded it was expanded and renamed Seodaemun in 1912.

The museum showcases the living conditions of the prisoners back in the day, and features torture rooms and paraphernalia, wooden boxes and tiny jail cells to keep prisoners in solitary confinement, and more. Some rooms even have dummies of prisoners and prison guards sitting in dark corners, just in case you aren't creeped out enough during your visit.

In 1992, the prison was turned into the Seodaemun Independence Park in remembrance of the Koreans who were imprisoned for fighting for independence. In 1998, this park underwent yet another transformation into the current Prison History Hall, as a way to educate locals and visitors on Korean history. – *Melody L. Goh*



Exhibits are seen on display at the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum in Nagasaki in August. This year marks the 75th year of the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. – *PHILIP FONG/AFP*