

# Reminders of a glorious past

Colonial giants still stand to greet visitors

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Photos by CHRIS LIM

IF YOU are taking the morning ferry from the mainland to Penang island, look out for two of China Street Ghaut's most imposing structures – the Malayan Railway Building (or Wisma Kastam as it is known today) and Wisma Yeap Chor Ee.

Against the backdrop of a clear, blue sky, these buildings will capture your imagination.

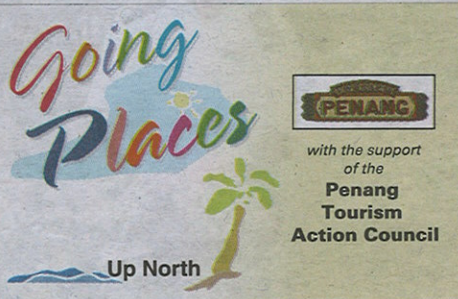
It may not be as dramatic as the famous Titanic scene where Leonardo DiCaprio uttered that unforgettable (and not to mention cheesy) "I am the king of the world" line, but a feeling of exhilaration will still wash over you.

Tan Yeow Wooi Culture & Heritage Research Studio director W.Y. Tan said in the old days that these buildings were important landmarks for the state's bustling port.

"Traders who docked at

»Both these buildings were designed with a very unique and exquisite feature – a distinctive arcade.«

– W.Y. TAN



the Railway Jetty (which was directly in front of the China Street Ghaut) would be greeted by the amazing sight of two colonial giants.

"Both these buildings were designed with a very unique and exquisite feature – a dis-



Grand old dame: The Wisma Yeap Chor Ee was once an important landmark.

tinctive arcade (a structure composed of a series of arches supported by columns).

"The Wisma Kastam building's arcade has been renovated but the one at Wisma Yap Chor Ee is still in its original form.

"For decades before Komtar was built, the building with its clock tower (which by the way is still ticking with precision) was the tallest

building on the island," he said.

Wisma Kastam which currently houses the state Customs Department was formerly the Malayan Railway Building that sat alongside trading offices and warehouses built in the 20th century.

The Malayan Railway Building was believed to be the only railway station in the world without a rail. Instead of platforms or trains, it had administrative offices, a ticketing booth and a first-class Railways Restaurant with Bar and Grill.

Passengers bought their tickets at the Penang Railway Station, walked to the Railway Jetty at the end of the China Street Ghaut and boarded the Railway Ferry Steamers to Butterworth to catch the train. Fares to and from Penang were inclusive of the ferry ride.

Built a century ago, the Malayan Railway Building marked the timely completion of the Federated Malay States (FMS) Railway which was mainly used to transport tin and crops.

It was the railway's northern region headquarters. In the late 60s, the state Customs Office occupied the building.

State Tourism Development and Environment Committee chairman Teng Chang Yeow recently announced that Visit Malaysia Year 2007 would see a new four-star hotel occupying the Wisma Kastam site.

Planning permission has been approved and it is now at the building plans approval stage.



Majestic: The Malayan Railway Building or Wisma Kastam as it is known today.

## Big plans for Wisma Yeap Chor Ee

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SINCE its establishment in the 1920s, Wisma Yeap Chor Ee has witnessed Penang's port and jetties welcome traders of all creed and colour.

As time passed, the building belonging to Ban Hin Lee Bank founder, the late Yeap Chor Ee, became muted with the changing times.

The majestic landmark that was also once home to Rainbow Art Gallery (one of the state's more active galleries then) was left to stand in dignified silence before finally getting its "15minutes of fame" in September last year.

Together with a 300-strong production crew, Chinese-American actress-director Joan Chen, pop star Wang Lee-Hom, China and mainland newcomer Tang Wei, Oscar-winning director Ang

Lee turned up to shoot his latest movie *Lust, Caution* at the China Street Ghaut building.

The movie, which also stars Cannes Best Actor winner Tony Leung Chiu Wai, saw Wisma Yeap Chor Ee being transformed into a shopping boutique in Shanghai for a day.

The heritage building was renamed 'Macy Company Limited, 1926,' given a fresh coat of white paint, and had a revolving door with curtains, display windows with mannequins, a wooden flower stall and a roofed traffic post outside.

Tan Yeow Wooi Culture & Heritage Research Studio director Tan Yeow Wooi said restoration of old colonial houses like Wisma Yeap Chor Ee could be lucrative for homeowners and the state in the long run.

"Every pre-war heritage building should be conserved - even

the seemingly insignificant shop houses in the inner city of George Town.

"Ang Lee could have made his movie anywhere in the world but he chose George Town because of its unique buildings that reflect an important era in history," he said, adding that if the state could restore all inner city buildings back to their former glory, it could attract more tourists and international film makers.

"Perhaps the state can help subsidise restoration works and come up with guidelines for filmmakers who want to utilise these heritage buildings. This will ensure that even though the facade is altered to suit the movie's settings, the original structure and fittings are not destroyed in the process," he said.

In 2002, the trustees of the Yeap Chor Ee Endowment Trust

vested trust properties, including Wisma Yeap Chor Ee to the Wawasan Education Foundation (WEF).

WEF later leased the heritage building to Wawasan Open University, which in turn, sub-leased it to Tourism Malaysia's investment arm – Pempena Sdn Bhd.

According to Pempena chief operating officer Mohd Rosly Selamat, the 21-year sub-lease signed in November last year, will see the building being turned into a luxury boutique hotel.

"We are in the midst of appointing a company to operate the hotel. So far, several foreign and local parties have expressed interest in the project. By March, an artist impression of the building will be ready and we will submit the building plans to the Municipal Council (MPPP) for approval," he said, adding that the company was optimistic that the

boutique hotel would be up and running before the end of the year.

The hotel will house a restaurant and spa and is set to cater to a very niche market.

"We are looking at attracting yachtsmen and Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) visitors to stay as long-term guests.

"There are also plans to provide butler service because the boutique hotel will be based on a luxury concept," he said, adding that the boutique hotel would only have 20 rooms measuring between 111sq m and 130 sq m.

"Rest assured, the facade and heritage value of the building will be maintained with the development. This building is truly a unique treasure and our boutique hotel will definitely complement the state government's efforts to promote George Town as a living heritage enclave," he said.