

HERITAGE

The forgotten history of KL's pioneering hotels

By Chris Prasad

KUALA LUMPUR — Malaysia enjoys a favourable reputation where hospitality is concerned; naturally conditioned to be warm and open, our hotel industry has flourished and gained renown for its exceptional, high calibre service.

However, despite the myriad of top-notch hotels on our landscape today, Kuala Lumpur's vibrant hotel industry is still comparatively young when measured against other global cities. In fact, we only began to emerge as an internationally competitive force in the early 1970s, when Kuala Lumpur Hilton, Holiday Inn, Equatorial and Regent entered the fray.

Prior to this, quality hospitality accommodation was actually in short supply, and access to quality accommodation was limited to a very exclusive crowd. There were only a handful that stood out, and though they have now been largely forgotten, they once stood as shining icons of high society — attracting everyone from silver screen movie stars to the who's who of the British Empire. Hotels in Kuala Lumpur can trace its genesis to 1915, exactly a century ago. The earliest attempts were not the purpose-built towering hotels we know, but quaint inns or simple bed and breakfast joints — like "backpackers", only a little more polished.

During much of the colonial era, the hotel industry was virtually non-existent and small boarding houses, catering entirely to British officers on official visits from Penang, Singapore or Perak were the most common forms of temporary accommodation.

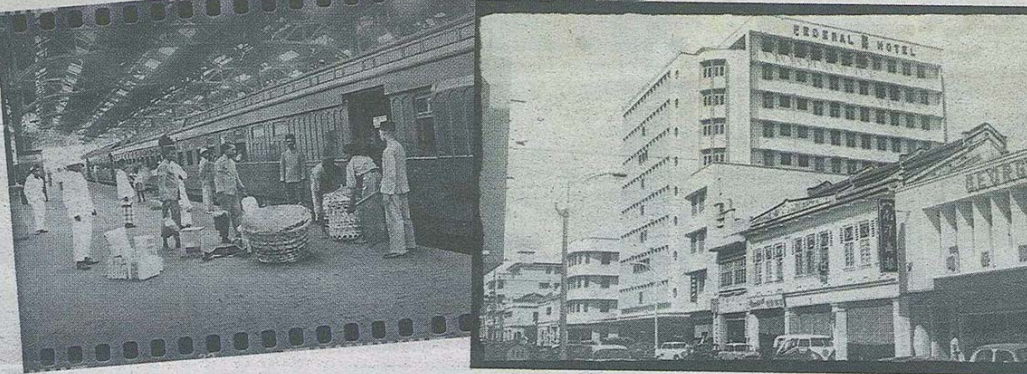
High-ranking government officers who travelled in and out of the city could always count on the provision of government quarters, guest houses, barracks or the even homes of a fellow Englishmen.

The first building in recorded history to be counted as a proper hotel was actually a large house near the bank of Klang river that belonged to a British trader. Not using the property as a primary home, the entrepreneur refurbished it to generate recurring income as a hotel. Because it was located in the exotic East, the owner named it the "Eastern Hotel" and it once was a major landmark along 26 Jalan Ampang.

By the second decade of the 20th century, however, it was becoming clear that better forms of accommodation were required to cater to the rapid growth of KL.

Just as airlines constantly open up new destinations today, in the early days trains were a major catalyst for population growth. KL's population had been swelling steadily since the creation of the railway link between Port Swettenham (now Port Klang) and KL in the 1890s. By the 1900s, a few thousand residents had multiplied to over 20,000.

To facilitate, the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station was completed in 1910 and the



shabby wooden building that once stood in the vicinity made way for one of the country's most endearing icons.

The Railway Station and Malayan Railway Administrative Building featured stunning architecture, with graceful arches and soaring minarets, and became an instant landmark for the KL community.

To serve the influx of railway commuters, a hotel was included as part of the structure. Simply called "Station Hotel", it was hugely popular and historical records show that it was almost always fully booked due to the convenience of the location.

Today, the hotel is known as the Heritage Station Hotel, and it was gazetted as a heritage site in 1983. Heritage Station finally closed its doors to guests in 2010, outlasting the historic railway station itself which was decommissioned in 2001 when KL Sentral took over as the main railway hub.

But back in those days, planters, rich miners, and even towkays from across the country who could afford a little luxury checked into Station Hotel.

By 1932, those who demanded a higher level of luxury only needed to cross the road to check in at the Majestic Hotel. Those on a budget, however, would have had to make do at a number of downtown motels located across the river. Alternatively, there was also the Coliseum on Batu Road (Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) or the nearby Rex.

In 1935 the Station Hotel and Majestic Hotel were considered the leading hotels

of the day. The Majestic, in particular, was considered to be the first modern hotel that met the international expectations of luxury accommodation.

It is a little-known fact that the building was actually never intended to be a hotel. The site first served as the German Consulate before a decision was made by city administrators to convert it into an apartment building. However, faced with a poor economy in the early 1930s, that concept was scrapped in favour of a 51-room grand hotel.

Once its doors were opened, it rapidly became a nucleus for social gatherings and a hotspot for wining, dining and entertainment. For many years, it was considered the most luxurious hotel in the peninsula and it attracted both the colonial and local elite.

In the lead up to World War II, according to historical accounts, the bar at the Majestic was like a scene from the movies; city kingpins, spies and informants gathered there to share (and sell) information.

During the Japanese Occupation from 1939 to 1945, Majestic Hotel was used as transit camp for Japanese officers. One persistent urban legend about the hotel is that a Japanese soldier (allegedly) committed suicide in room 48 when news reached the Majestic that Japan had lost the war. It is said that he continued to haunt the room until the hotel was shut down in 1984 — but there have been no such reports since its reopening in December 2012.

When the British returned in 1945, the

Majestic reclaimed its status as the pre-eminent hotel. Afternoon tea was back on the menu and the porcelain, silverware and starched linen were back in their place.

As testament to its popularity, some guests actually became permanent residents of the hotel, refusing to leave and take up private abodes even when offered. Among them, were Mrs Buxton, the secretary to High Commissioner Sir Gerald Templar and a certain Mr Donald Davis. Both stayed there for over 20 years!

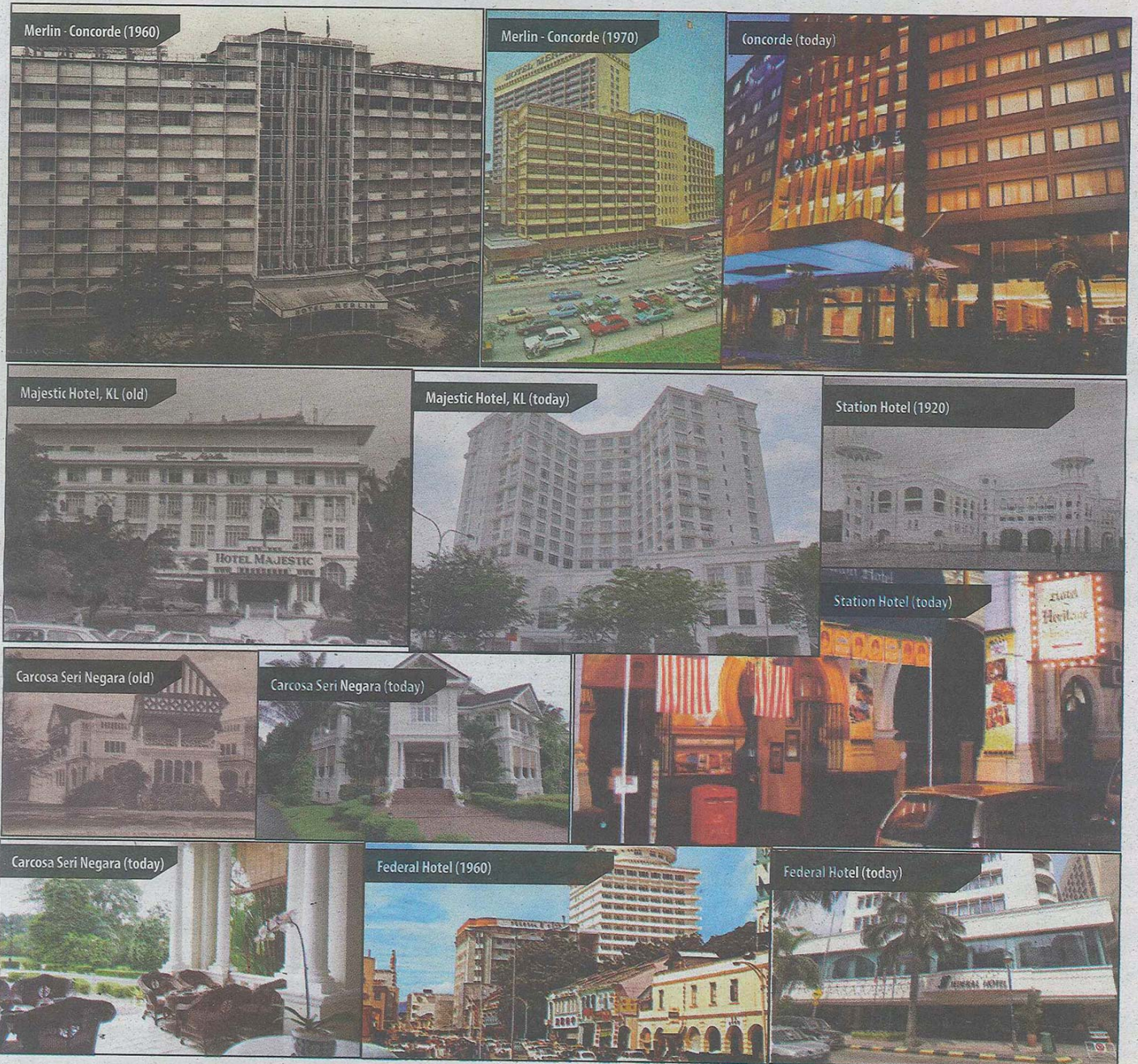
Of nationalistic significance, the founding members of UMNO, Dato Onn Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman met regularly at the Majestic's rooftop club to discuss the country's independence.

However, by the time we gained independence in 1957, its prominence began to decline. One last claim to fame before it closed was that it hosted actor David Niven while he was filming the 1975 movie Paper Tiger.

When new and multi-storeyed modern hotels began to enter the picture in the early 1980s, the building was repurposed to house the National Art Gallery for a few years before the completion of the current National Art Gallery on Jalan Tun Razak.

Today, the Majestic has been refurbished and revived, retaining much of its colonial splendour. It features a modern hotel block as an annex, similar to Shanghai's Waldorf-Astoria and Hong Kong's Peninsula.

The Majestic's decline in the 1950s



coincided with the rise of another important KL hotel that was making Malaysian history. Federal Hotel, which was built in 1957 by Tan Sri Datuk Low Yat, was specifically created to cater to dignitaries attending the Merdeka (Independence) celebrations. It was to be the first "all-Malayan" hotel, and its builder was determined to make its mark felt.

The Federal Hotel's Bintang revolving restaurant, for example, caused a sensation as it was the first of its kind. Today, the Federal Hotels International group continues to operate Federal Hotel, Capitol Hotel and The Grace in Sydney, Australia.

Another historic hotel that is still operational is Merlin on Jalan Sultan Ismail, which is now known by its modern moniker, the Concorde. It opened in 1959, and for decades, it was considered among the most prestigious hotels in the city.

In 1972, Kuala Lumpur Hilton gave

Malaysians their first taste of a renowned, five-star international brand. At 36 storeys, it was also the tallest building in the country. Its Paddock Supper Club and Lounge overlooking the then race course of Kuala Lumpur was the height of class and prestige. Events and performances held there were considered the most exclusive — and the most expensive.

Today, the building is known as the Crown Plaza Mutiara, while the Hilton brand is now found in KL Sentral and Petaling Jaya.

1973 saw the birth of homegrown brand Equatorial on Jalan Sultan Ismail and the arrival of the internationally renowned Holiday Inn.

Holiday Inn became known as Holiday Inn on the Park as it faced the extensive parkland of KLCC but it is now the Impiana KLCC Hotel & Spa. The current Holiday Inn Kuala Lumpur is actually located in Glenmarie, Shah Alam, while the new Holiday Inn

Express Bukit Bintang is expected to open in 2015.

Another historic hotel that commands historic attention is the prestigious Carcosa Seri Negara, an ultra luxurious boutique hotel comprising two pre-independence mansions set on hills overlooking 16 hectares of verdant lawns, flowering gardens and parkland.

The only reason it did not feature early on in this article is because Carcosa spent much of its early years serving as a private home. Its first tenant was the Resident-General Sir Frank Swettenham who named it after the poetic dramatic novel The King in Yellow from the paragraph "and beyond the towers of Carcosa rose the moon".

This magnificent manor of seven bedrooms and nine bathrooms was completed in 1896 for \$25,000 (prior to the introduction of the ringgit). It was given in perpetuity to the British Government after Independence

as home of the British High Commissioner before finally being returned to the Malaysian Government in 1987. It was converted into a hotel in 1989.

The second mansion in the enclave, Seri Negara, is a stately mansion built in 1913 to house the Governor of Singapore and important government guests. Formerly called King's House, Seri Negara also has seven suites.

Carcosa Seri Negara's first guest was Queen Elizabeth II during her state visit in 1989. The Grand Makmur Suite occupied by Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip continues to be available for booking.

Sadly, many other historic hotels that have served the nation have made way for modern progress in the last 30 years. However, with the nation rapidly reaching fully developed status, perhaps more attention can now be spared on preserving our rich heritage.