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28 April 2016



What's life like in the ports and jetties that dot the East Coast?

The men laid down their cards, with leaves of crumpled money shy between their feet. They're surrounded by empty colourful containers, fishing nets and rusty trolleys. The crash and rippling of the waves behind them drown out their conversation. It's only 10 o'clock in the morning and the vessels have yet to arrive.

"The boats leave before dawn and will probably return ..." one of them pauses for awhile to think, "Around after 2 in the evening." This is a typical afternoon one would catch at small jetties in the East Coast. Fishermen, middlemen and sellers would lounge around until the boats return from their fishing expedition. Sometimes, they would hang out at the nearby *warung*, catching a conversation with friends, laughing over a mug of *kopi o'*.



But while idleness may be the order of morning, the energy would almost certainly take a dramatic shift when the vessels come to sight from afar. Especially so in bigger, more established jetties such as Tok Bali. Unlike smaller jetties, the one in Tok Bali houses larger boats that would have been at sea for days, often returning with more catch.



As it comes to dock, the crew jump straight to work – loading the tonnes of fish out into transfer-nets and large containers. The division of labour is clear: the vessel crew would unload the catch onto the docks, where the fishes will be sorted twice. First by a few crew members, and the second time by a group of women standing over an ice-coated table.

Deft hands would feel the fish for firmness, while sharp eyes would examine its form for defects. The damaged catch would be tossed aside, while the good ones went further down the line right into colour-coded containers, ready to be weighed and sold off. "Sometimes we get less, sometimes more. But it's always about 1,000 kilograms. On good days, maybe double," says one of the men carrying the containers.

But not all is idle for those who do not sail the seas. On hot afternoons, the many men left behind by their seafaring brethren would turn to other occupations. It differs from jetty to jetty all along the East Coast. A little under 30 minutes from Kota Bharu, the men work at repairing boats in the Bachok shipyard. A rusty anchor stands behind an elderly man as he saws away at the thick plank of wood, a half-repaired boat hulking behind him.

One only needs to travel along the river to discover the little differences in these villages. Jeti Kampong Laut, closer to the Kelantan capital, has a ferry that operates hourly at the cost of RM1 for every one-way trip to the Kota Bharu jetty. Right in the heart of this riverside village is also a modest *serunding* industry, illustrating an entrepreneurial spirit that is part of the Kelantan identity.



Further down in the many Terengganu seaside fishing villages such as Seberang Takir, one only needs to turn up at the beach by noon to see the boats come to shore with their catch. Fresh from the ocean, these fishermen would sell their catch directly to the local community. Many purchase in bulk for their restaurant business – a common sight throughout any traveller's drive in the trunk roads. It's not uncommon to detect the subtle tinge of ocean salt right off one's deep-fried fish when dining in one of the roadside stalls for lunch.

And then there are those who turn their experiences into an enterprise. It isn't unusual to hear of former fishermen who now run fishing tours. Squid fishing, exclusive to the East Coast, is an activity that's becoming increasingly popular amongst visitors to Terengganu. A group of people, sailing into the sea in the dead of the night – armed with nothing but rods and torchlights.



A noticeable observation among these hardy seamen is the lack of youths. "Not everyone wants to live this life – it's a lot of hard work and money can be difficult to come by. Young folks these days prefer it easier," says one of the men at the jetty, hooking a worm bait to his fishing rod's fly. He indicates to a group of young boys sitting by the river bank, chatting animatedly with their rods planted firmly to the ground, motorcycles behind them. Many of the younger generation from fishermen families nowadays have better education and prefer to enter the oil and gas industry, taking occupation in an industry that furnishes a better quality of living and job security than their fathers'.



It is this dwindling of local youths that brings about migrants who join the life of the sea in the East Coast. The incounter Indonesian, Filipino and Burmese crew members who spend their time at sea with their Malaysian counterparts. In major ports such Kemaman, they would usually stay in their designated ship, doing odd jobs ranging from painting to repairing parts of the ship. With a well-stocked ship and Internet access, the migrant crew would find very little reason to leave the ship apart from visiting the market to purchase supplies and personal items.

As one stands over a creaking jetty, surrounded by a fleet of colourful boats and thick in the air of fishermen bringing containers of seafood in – there is no doubt that the winds of this life and trade is slowly evolving, and will probably be the last ones who do so. And little of whatever is left of this profession sits among them in the wooden shacks where they enjoy an afternoon of conversation and *kopi ai*.

By Aziff Azuddin
Photos by Aziff Azuddin

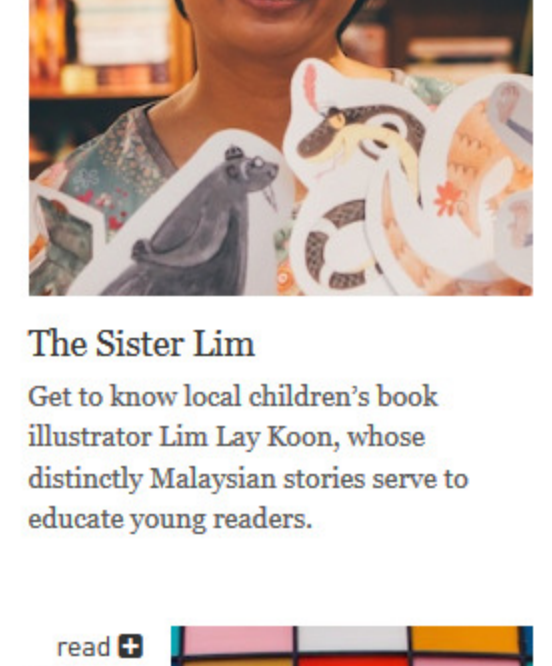
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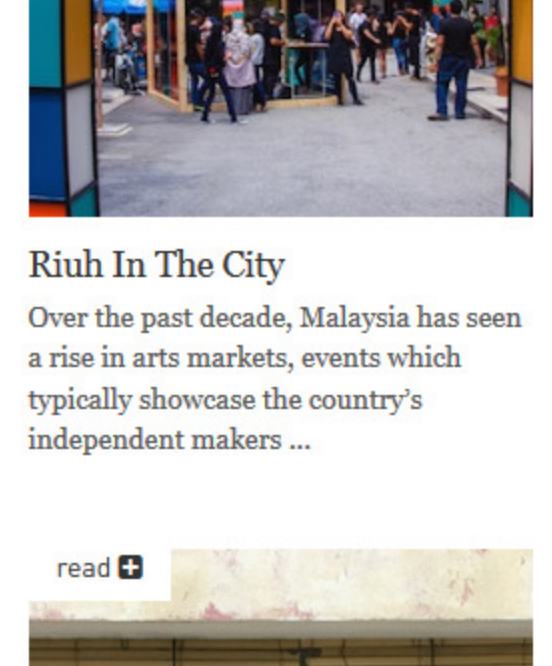
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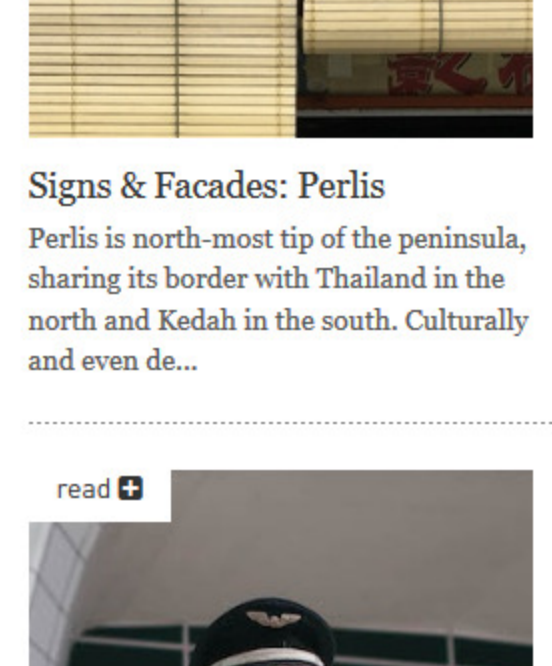
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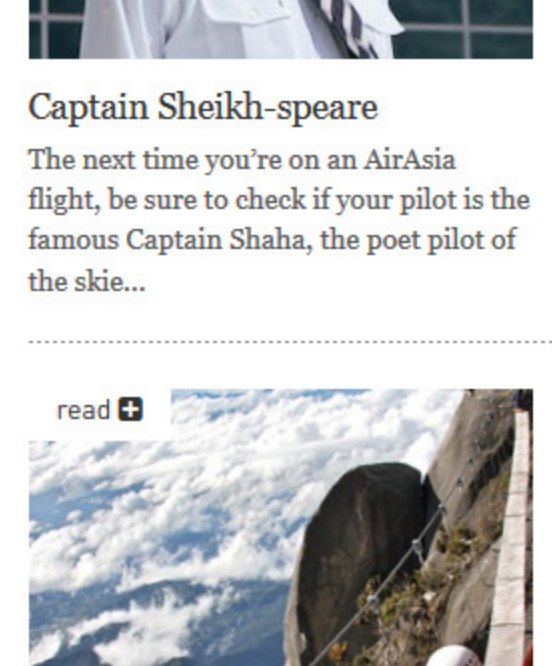
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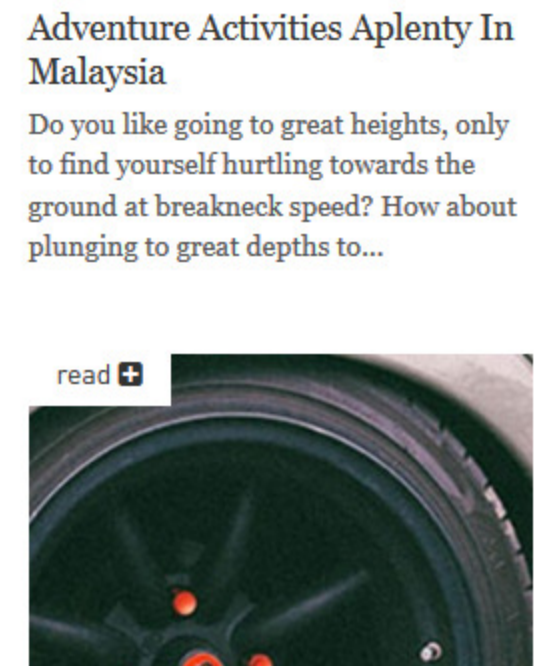
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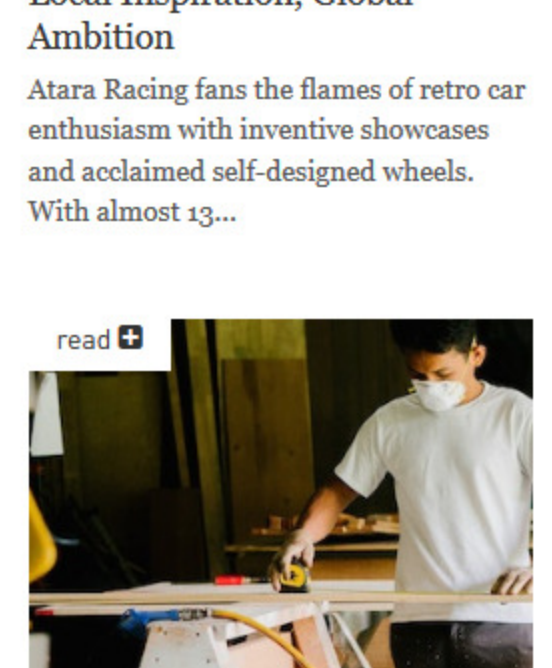
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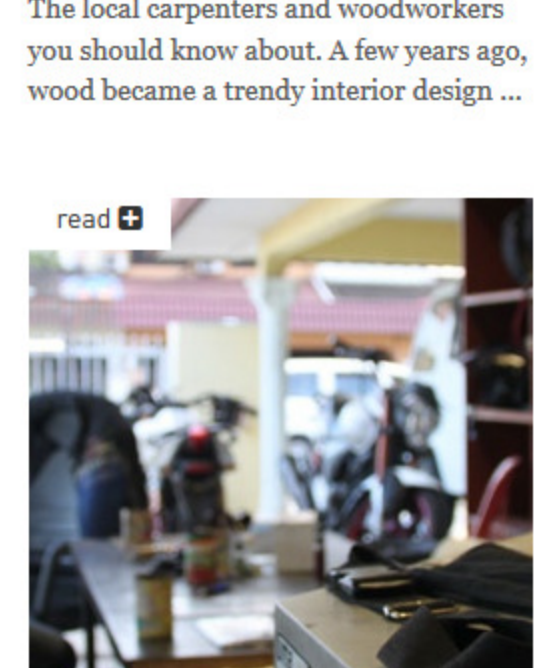
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